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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002093

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TAGS: [IS](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: MICHEL AOUN RATCHETS UP THE
CRITICISM...CONSIDERS QUITTING NATIONAL DIALOGUE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun strongly attacked an array of perceived enemies in a televised speech on June 21, and the next day led a combined FPM/Hizballah delegation to Lebanon's Constitutional Council to protest judicial "inactivity" regarding a number of FPM challenges to last year's parliamentary election results. Senior Aoun advisor Gebran Bassil informed the Embassy that in recent weeks the Aounists have been debating two possible courses of action: attempt to reach out to Saad Hariri and PM Siniora, or, alternatively, quit the National Dialogue process and put even more pressure on what they perceive is a beleaguered Siniora government. Bassil stated that former General Aoun's harsh rhetoric earlier in the week and the subsequent protest against the Constitutional Council was a clear indication that Aoun, after diligently trying to open a channel to Saad Hariri, "has had enough" and is now committed to bringing down the government. End summary.

AOUN OPPOSED TO SUMMER BREAK

¶2. (C) Senior Aoun advisor Gebran Bassil met poloff on June 22. Without much prelude, he flatly stated that Michel Aoun will not allow the Siniora government to "glide" through the summer, but has decided to turn up the heat wherever possible to highlight the "incompetence and selfishness" of the governing Sunni-dominated majority.

¶3. (C) Bassil maintained that Michel Aoun had tried to build rapport with Siniora and Hariri during the National Dialogue process, but in the general's view, had been continually rebuffed. The influential advisor (and son-in-law) said that in recent weeks, FPM's senior members had seriously discussed the idea of proposing a unity government, but felt the words and actions of the Sunni-dominated majority continued to be exclusionary. Although he said he had not been personally involved, Bassil indicated the Aounists have been in discussions with Walid Jumblatt in an attempt to reach out to the March 14 alliance, but that the initiative had gone nowhere.

¶4. (C) Irrespective of the traditionally slow months of summer when Lebanon's Parliament is in recess and many of the country's politicians travel abroad, Bassil emphasized that Michel Aoun has decided to keep pressing the Siniora government as hard as possible. The advisor recited a litany of perceived government failures and missteps: the

deliberate exclusion of the country's Maronite president from an international conference in Romania, an ill-conceived economic reform plan that was drafted in isolation, a politicization of the judiciary and its refusal to hear cases involving electoral irregularities, a hybrid draft electoral law that pleased no one, a "botched" initiative to meet with Syrian President al-Asad, a covert Sunni takeover of the ISF's intelligence capabilities, and a continuing campaign of filling almost every bureaucratic vacancy with a Sunni appointee.

15. (C) Bassil echoed the language Michel Aoun had used in a June 22 interview when he characterized Siniora's government as paralyzed and "rebellious." Without specificity, Bassil argued that despite Michel Aoun's patience and willingness to discuss almost any issue with the March 14 alliance, Aoun's overtures had been "rudely" ignored.

16. (C) Bassil implied that Aoun's attempt at reconciliation was drawing to an end and that Aoun and his senior advisors have decided to attack PM Siniora at every opportunity. The one area that the advisor held out some hope of cooperation was the electoral law, but even there Bassil argued that the government was being opaque and indecisive. Bassil emphasized that in the nearly three weeks since the release of the draft statute, neither PM Siniora nor Saad Hariri have clearly stated their positions. He argued it was yet another example of indecisiveness and lack of progress.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE...PULLING THE PLUG?

17. (C) According to Bassil, Michel Aoun "has had enough" and is seriously considering withdrawing from the National

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Dialogue process, which has been meeting intermittently since early March. He said Aoun is expected to make a decision shortly after the next meeting scheduled for June 28. Bassil stated that if "more of the same" comes from the March 14 members in that session -- i.e. political and economic positions arrived at without inclusive coordination -- he believes former General Aoun will announce his intention to withdraw from the process.

18. (C) When asked what that would accomplish, Bassil said it will make the Christian community realize that Siniora's Sunni-dominated government has few answers and evaporating support. Bassil stated the Free Patriotic Movement would apply constant political pressure throughout the summer, with the intention of eventually forcing the formation of a new government. He was also emphatic that even though the Aounists make no attempt to hide their disdain of the pro-reform Siniora government, they deeply resent the attempt by certain March 14 members to paint Michel Aoun as a ill-disguised supporter of Syrian interests. Bassil argued strongly that Aoun only had the interests of a sovereign Lebanon at heart and his entire political career proved that.

COMMENT

19. (C) Although most of the country's political class seems to be throttling down for the summer, it is clear that former General Aoun wants to up the pressure. Numerous observers have noted that recent Aoun missteps (the May 12 labor protests, presence of Aounists at the launch of the pro-Syrian Marada party, lack of progress on issues addressed in the February 6 joint memorandum with Hizballah) have made the former general most anxious about the gradual, but perceptible loss of confidence in his leadership by the Christian community. As a consequence, Aoun may feel it is necessary to commence a heavy-hitting campaign against the Siniora/Hariri ruling bloc to regain what his detractors hopefully describe as his ebbing support. If Aoun withdraws

from the National Dialogue, he will certainly recapture the headlines, but perhaps not in the light he desires. As Speaker Nabih Berri rhetorically asked us several weeks ago, "who wants to be the person who is blamed for ending the flawed, but useful process?"

¶10. (C) In part, Aoun, with his bloc left out of the cabinet, has chosen an obvious course of action: across the globe, opposition leaders oppose sitting governments in hopes of replacing them. Yet it is worth keeping in mind Aoun's history of going sharply against the grain. In 1989, exhausted Lebanese political leaders and the international community all embraced the Taif Accord as the best path available to ending the 15-year civil war. Aoun rejected Taif and deployed his followers to besiege the Embassy and humiliate Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. In 1990, when Iraq burnished its regional and international pariah reputation after invading Kuwait, Aoun welcomed money and arms from Saddam Hussein. In May 2005, when pro-independence Lebanese were still looking to end covert Syrian interference in Lebanon, Aoun returned to Lebanon and choose to ignore Syria in favor of attacking (as he said in his first public speech) "financial politics" (i.e., the Hariris) and "feudal politics" (i.e., Jumblatt). In February 2006, when Lebanese politicians, prodded by Walid Jumblatt's statements, finally began an honest assessment of Hizballah's arms, Aoun concluded his memorandum of understanding with Nasrallah, giving Hizballah political cover. Now, even Hizballah has reportedly agreed with the March 14 movement's desire to cool the overheated rhetoric and keep the security situation calm, in order to allow a normal tourism season and breathe needed life into the Lebanese economy. But Aoun again is moving in the opposite direction, in choosing to up the pressure on Siniora and Hariri in ways that could lead to street protests and even violence. His hints at pulling out of the National Dialogue that other Lebanese strongly support (even while recognizing its limitations) is another example of his contrarian spirit. He is playing a most dangerous game.

¶11. (C) Appealing to populist instincts and playing on Christian and Shia fears of Sunni power, Aoun will certainly find followers willing to go anywhere he leads them. But his approach -- rooted in intentionally exacerbating confessional tensions -- seems as ill-advised in terms of Lebanon's best interests as all of his previous diversions from the mainstream. Certainly he is once again proving that his tactics diverge significantly from U.S. policy as well as our hopes for Lebanon. End comment.

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